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ABSTRACT

Briefly described are certain childhood attitudes, abilities, and experiences likely to help children succeed in school. Parents are advised that children will have a better school experience if they are familiar with the school building, the bus route, and their teacher; if they know other children attending their school; if they have good self-help skills; if they are familiar with tools used in classrooms; if they have a healthy appetite for books; if they have seen people writing and have been able to try writing in play situations; if they have some experience with helping out at home; and if they have had plenty of time to play. (RH)

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# *Starting School:*

# HAPPY BEGINNINGS

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As the time for grade 1 entry approaches, many parents wonder about whether their child will be ready for school. Will he cry and miss me? Will he like the teacher? Will the teacher like him? Will he know what he needs to know? It may comfort you to know that principals and grade 1 teachers are also planning and wondering about the year ahead, working to make sure that school is ready for your child.

You might be wondering how to help your child at home, what children need to know for grade 1, what the teacher will expect. Grade 1 teachers know from experience that grade 1 children—like people of any age—will have different interests, abilities and experiences. They know that they cannot set a standard of readiness and expect all children to meet it. Most teachers agree, however, that certain attitudes, abilities and experiences help children succeed in school. We describe some of these things below.

**It helps if . . .**

*children are familiar with the school building, the bus route, and the teacher.*

Your school may schedule an orientation visit in the spring or it may use a system of staggered entry, which means that grade 1 children begin school in small groups in the fall so that the teacher can get to know them individually right from the start. If the staggered entry pattern is not used, or if you have arrived too late to take part in a spring orientation session, it would be a good idea to arrange a school visit yourself. Walking or driving the route from home to school, meeting the principal and teacher and looking around the classroom and playground will give your child a clearer idea of what school is like and will take away some of the mystery and possible fear from the first day.

**It helps if . . .**

*children know other children attending the school.*

Children with friends in the neighbourhood will find it reassuring to be reminded that these friends will be at school with them. If your family is new to the neighbourhood, the school principal or teacher can help put you in touch with other parents.

**It helps if . . .**

*children have good self-help skills; dressing, eating, etc.*

If you let your child pour her own milk at home, she'll manage better with her thermos at school. If you let her struggle with her own clothes at home and even help the younger ones, she'll do better with coat, scarf, boots, mitts and lunch pail. She will need plenty of opportunity to practise doing things for herself and lot of patience and encouragement from you.

**It helps if . . .**

*children are familiar with the tools of the trade.*

In grade 1, children use scissors, glue, pencils and crayons and paper. If you make these things available for your child to use at home for his own projects, he will become more skillful with them.

If you like to look through catalogs, magazines, etc., the chances are that he will enjoy this kind of browsing too. It's nice to have a

separate place where you keep magazines, Sunday illustrated supplements, funnies, used wrapping paper and old catalogs that are o.k. to cut. Your child is then free to cut out pictures of interest. The pictures can be kept to talk about, sort, paste onto paper or box lids, or eventually discard. Some children like to cut out pictures to hang up on their walls. You can label the pictures with your child's own words: 'bulldozer' or 'That's me and Andy in our snow house.'

Drawing materials are important, but they need not be expensive. Drawing paper can be grocery bags, junk mail, used envelopes or the tops of cardboard cartons—grocery stores cut these off and can give you a a stack if you ask for them. You can get some great drawing supplies by scrounging around this way and at the same time help your child learn first hand about conservation and recycling. Crayons, pencils, markers and chalk are all good drawing materials. If you can make some shelf space available or fix up a cardboard box or an old suitcase, your child will learn to keep scissors, paper and crayons together neatly. Drawing is a most beneficial way for children to express their observations, thoughts and feelings. Remember, children's drawings are their private creations. By all means be admiring. You can say: 'Would you like to tell me about your picture?' This is often the beginning of a fascinating conversation—but if your child says 'No'—respect that too. Drawing develops the co-ordination that is needed in writing, so children who draw a great deal tend to be confident and skillful writers too.

**It helps if . . .**

*children have a healthy appetite for books.*

The best way to get your child to love books is to read to her often. It is helpful to have a

good variety of books at home. You can supplement your own collection with books from the library or bookmobile and you can borrow books from friends or relatives with grown children. Books also make wonderful presents. If you visit the library with your child, she'll soon be choosing her own books. Reading aloud should be a pleasant, relaxed experience for you both, perhaps a regular before-bedtime ritual. Snuggle up together in a comfortable chair and let her ask questions and turn the pages.

Your child should also be free to look through books on her own. This independent browsing is another important step toward reading. Book lovers usually become eager readers.

**It helps if . . .**

*children have seen people writing, and have been able to try out writing in play situations.*

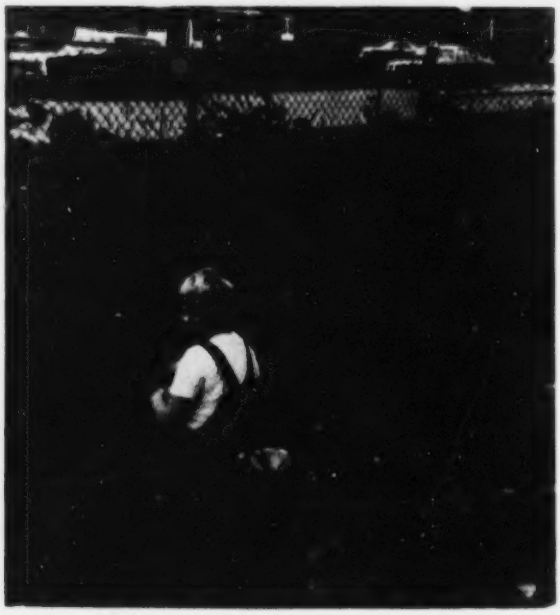
Young children like to imitate the adults they admire. Just as they pretend to drive or cook, they will copy their parents' writing behaviour if given a bit of encouragement. Give your child a pencil and piece or paper to write or pretend to write his own shopping list while you write yours. Even if his list is written in scribble and is completely incomprehensible to you, he'll probably enjoy 'reading' it to you. If you're taking notes at a meeting, give him his own pad and pencil. Sit down together to write letters to Grandpa

and the cousins. In short, whatever writing activities you engage in will be interesting to your child, sometimes in a play situation, sometimes in an effort to join you in your project. These *informal* experiences show your child how and why adults use writing. They will make writing in school a much more meaningful and purposeful activity. As with reading aloud, keep this pleasant, playful and relaxed. No need at all to push a child who is not yet interested, or to worry about perfect handwriting or correct spelling. The idea is to make happy beginnings.

**It helps if . . .**

*children have some experience with helping out at home.*

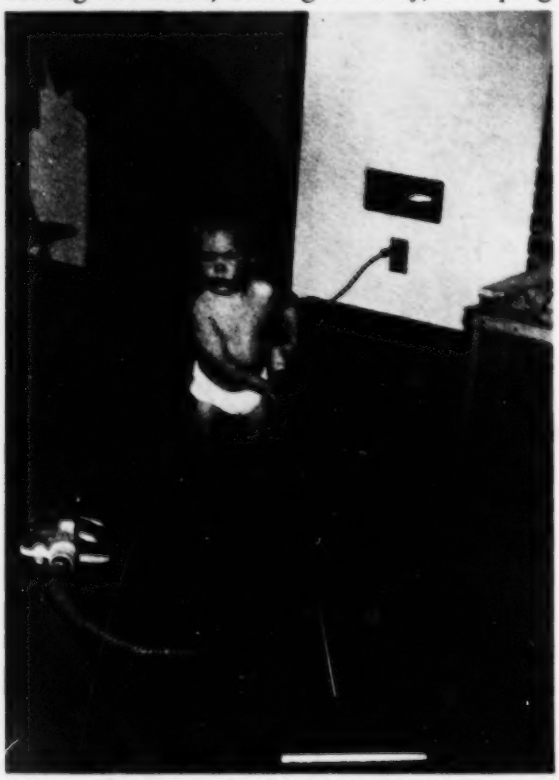
Grade 1 is the first experience of group living for some children, and family living can be



an excellent preparation for that. The give and take, helping and sharing, even the painful realization, through conflict, that there is more than one opinion on most subjects, are vital lessons.

Having some regular chores to carry out at home is an excellent way to learn responsible behaviour. Just as important, doing something to help the family makes young children feel grown up and important.

You are the best judge of what jobs would be appropriate for your child and your family. Whatever the jobs may be—feeding the cat, setting the table, sorting laundry, sweeping

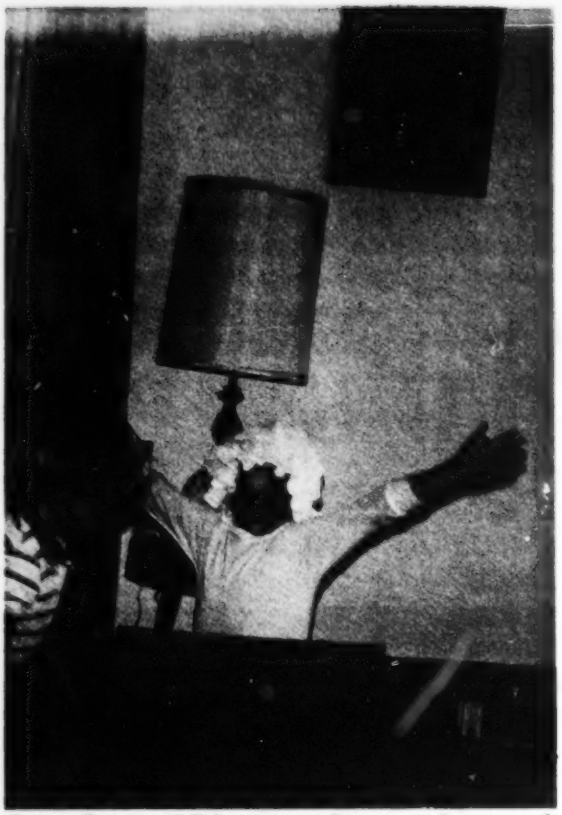


snow off the porch, fetching the mail—pay your child the compliment of expecting her to contribute to the family's efforts. Let her know how much you appreciate her help. Needless to say, responsible family members make responsible group members too.

## It helps if . . .

*children have had plenty of time to play.*

This may sound strange at first; you may ask, don't all children play? Most children do play, just as children have always done, but there are some differences for modern chil-



dren. Some children watch many hours of television each day, and while some shows may be pleasant and appropriate for young children, some are bewildering, violent and just plain bad for them. Perhaps a more important point to consider if your child

watches television is what he is *not* doing while he is watching. He is not climbing, running, jumping or playing in the fresh air; he is not curling up with a book; he is not playing dress-up or pretending to be an astronaut or a fisherman or a doctor or a fire fighter or a daddy; he is not playing out life, stretching his imagination, making sense of puzzling or worrying events. Pretend play does all these things for children. It helps them to be more capable, resourceful people. T.V. isn't bad in itself, but if it takes up too much of a child's time he is bombarded with stimulating images which he has no opportunity to process. Play is a child's most effective way of thinking about and making sense of what happens to him in a confusing world.

Planned, formal, 'enriching' activities, like organized sports, classes and lessons, can also be a problem for a child if they take up too much of his time or make him feel that he must compete or perform to please adults.

If you allow your child free, unprogrammed time to do simple things like building with blocks or lego, playing with dolls, playing with bath toys, digging in the sand pile, making a snow fort, dressing up or drawing, you can be sure that you are providing enriching experiences. Play activities like these develop the mind and the imagination.

Parents sometimes feel a sense of urgency and pressure about preparing their children for school. This is understandable but unnecessary. The simplest, wisest and most enjoyable rule to follow is: everything in a meaningful context.

This means that the time to think about numbers is when you and your child are counting dinner plates or chickens or following a recipe; numerals are relevant when you're looking up a telephone number; you might talk about shapes when you're examining buildings or cutting out cookies. Young children don't need to be motivated to learn, they are already curious. By respecting their curiosity and helping them discover some answers for themselves, by listening to their discoveries and deductions, adults enhance the exciting natural process of learning.

Your child may be a confirmed book lover—or just beginning to be interested. She may be able to tie her shoes—or she may not. She may be able to write her name—or she may not. She's your child and you know she's pretty special. Grade 1 is ready for her.